The Human Services Workforce Initiative

MULTIPLE WORKFORCES

Job Turnover in Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice: The Voices of Former Frontline Workers





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The Voices of Former Frontline Workers

Introduction

The Human Services Workforce Initiative (HSWI) is focused on the frontline workers serving vulnerable children and families. HSWI's premise is that human services matter. Delivered well, they can, and do, positively impact the lives of vulnerable children and families, often at critical points in their lives.

We believe that the quality of the frontline worker influences the effectiveness of services they deliver to children and families. If workers are well-trained and supported, have access to the resources that they need, possess a reasonable workload and are valued by their employers, it follows that they will be able to effectively perform their jobs. If, however, they are as vulnerable as the children and families that they serve, they will be ineffective in improving outcomes for children and families.

Unfortunately, all indications today are that our frontline human services workforce is struggling. In some instances poor compensation contributes to excessive turnover; in others an unreasonable workload and endless paperwork renders otherwise capable staff ineffective; and keeping morale up is difficult in the human services fields and it is remarkable that so many human services professionals stick to it, year after year.

HSWI's mission is to work with others to raise the visibility of, and sense of urgency about, workforce issues. Through a series of publications and other communications efforts we hope to:

- ß Call greater attention to workforce issues.
- ß Help to describe and define the status of the human services workforce.
- ß Disseminate data on current conditions.
- ß Highlight best and promising practices.
- ß Suggest systemic and policy actions which can make a deep, long term difference.

This paper by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency reports on 300 interviews with former frontline workers in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. It puts a human face on the turnover numbers and begins to answer the critical question of why these highly motivated individuals left their jobs and, in some instances, their field.

Additional information on the human services workforce, and on HSWI, is available at www.cornerstones4kids.org.

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Executive Summary

The human service workforce is responsible for ensuring the safety and well being of many underprivileged and financially disadvantaged members of society. Previous literature highlights the complex responsibilities and challenges this workforce faces each day, including onerous workloads, lack of resources, inadequate supervision and training, lack of standards and systemization, and low wages. Accordingly, human service organizations are plagued by high levels of stress, burnout, and turnover. Though turnover can be problematic in any profession, it is especially taxing within the human services, as excessively high turnover rates can potentially translate into lower quality services provided to dependent youth and families.

The current study aims to address the factors motivating human service workers to leave their jobs. Specifically, 300 former child welfare and juvenile justice employees who had recently left their positions were interviewed over the telephone. The information gathered from these interviews revealed that organizational factors, as opposed to inherently stressful job responsibilities, have a major influence on child welfare and juvenile justice employee retention.

In particular, the majority of participants reported that lack of advancement opportunities, burdensome workloads, and lack of agency and supervisory support influenced their decisions to leave their jobs. Human service workers enter the field knowing that they will be asked to work hard under difficult conditions. However, they have their limits and expect to be supported and treated fairly by their employers.

Provide Opportunities for Advancement

Lack of opportunity for advancement was especially important for former juvenile justice staff, but had an influence on the decisions of both juvenile justice and child welfare workers:

- Juvenile justice: 60 percent left due to lack of advancement
- Child welfare: 29 percent left due to lack of advancement

While juvenile justice participants were more concerned with opportunities to advance professionally and earn higher wages, child welfare workers more often reported wanting to have their accomplishments supported and recognized. It is important for organizations to provide fair and adequate opportunities for advancement and recognition, even when salary increases are not feasible.

Reduce Workloads

Unending work and heavy caseloads were for the two most important reasons behind child welfare workers' decisions to leave. Heavy workload was also an important factor for juvenile justice workers.

- Juvenile justice: 37 percent left due to unending work, and 31 percent due to heavy caseloads
- Child welfare: 68 percent left due to unending work, and 66 percent due to heavy caseloads

The majority of all participants reported they worked overtime "often," some without compensation. Given that burdensome workloads are related to stress and burnout, providing workers with fair and flexible schedules could improve retention.

Implement Open and Supportive Agency Practices

Both child welfare and juvenile justice participants expressed concern regarding agency leadership and managerial practices and felt that agencies should involve staff in decision making.

- Juvenile justice: 43 percent left due to unsatisfactory supervision, and 55 percent due to lack of quality leadership
- Child welfare: 45 percent left due to unsatisfactory supervision, and 55 percent due to lack of quality leadership

Given the serious concerns regarding management and supervision, implementing practical, supportive, and collaborative practices may allow staff to spend more time in direct contact with clients and may also improve retention.

Human service work is challenging and requires a great deal of education and dedication. In order to ensure that valuable human service workers continue to make contributions and are not lost through turnover, organizations must encourage a positive work environment by implementing fair, supportive, and responsive practices.

Introduction

Excessive turnover is a problem in any profession, especially so in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Frontline workers in these systems are serving our society's fragile, needy, and underserved children and parents. Annual turnover in child welfare has been estimated between 20 and 40 percent (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; Reagh, 1994). This high turnover impacts all participants in our society's safety net systems. It affects the lives and careers of the exiting workers, who may remain dedicated to human service, but who feel that they cannot remain in the positions they worked hard to obtain. The staff that does not leave is adversely affected as they must absorb higher caseloads, reducing the time spent on the preexisting caseload and increasing their stress levels and the possibility of burnout. Employee exodus places additional strain on the agencies from which they leave. Both public and private organizations suffer from high turnover in terms of lost productivity as well as the expenses of recruitment and training. Even in 1995 dollars, the cost per employee leaving CPS agencies was estimated to be $10,000 (Graef & Hill, 2000). And in perhaps the greatest tragedy of the high turnover rates, funds channeled to replace workers rather than provide services are likely to negatively affect the children and families served by the agency.

Harrison (1980) found that 68 percent of 112 child welfare workers predicted that they would stay two years or less in their current child welfare position. In another study, nearly 45 percent of child welfare worker respondents indicated that they were very likely or somewhat likely to look for a new job with another employer in the next year (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984). Actual average duration of employment for the child welfare workforce has been estimated to be less than two years (Cicero-Reese & Clark, 1998). The Texas Juvenile Probation Commission estimated that, statewide, 62 percent of certified probation officers had been employed for less than six years (2000).

It is unfortunate that well-intentioned and well-educated people are leaving their jobs in child welfare and juvenile justice in high numbers. Why do so many human service workers leave their positions? This study focused on the question of why so many human service workers leave their positions by asking former employees their opinions. In their estimate, what were the biggest challenges associated with their duties? What were the greatest sources of dissatisfaction? Finally, what must be done to ameliorate this situation so that dedicated workers

stay in their jobs? To that end, approximately 300 former child welfare and juvenile justice employees shared their perspectives and opinions in telephone interviews with the National Council on Crime and Delinquency.

The final sample consisted of 297 former workers, 161 in child welfare and 136 in juvenile justice. The study sample included former child welfare and juvenile justice workers who had worked in a wide array of job positions and work environments for county, state, and private non-profit agencies. All of these workers left their positions recently. Employees were categorized by sector (child welfare and juvenile justice) and by job function (caseworkers, supervisors, juvenile probation officers and detention officers). All of the child welfare workers had worked for public child welfare agencies in either county- or state-run systems. The former juvenile justice employees had either worked for public, county probation departments or for private non-profit agencies that provide community-based treatment and supervision services through contracts with juvenile justice agencies in several states. While participants had held a position in which they directly served youth and/or their families, not all were carrying caseloads in the sense of being responsible on an ongoing basis for a particular youth's progress through the system. Most of the discussion, however, will focus on frontline staff who carried caseloads.

The results of this study are presented separately for child welfare and juvenile justice workers, followed by comparisons between the two. For each sector (child welfare and juvenile justice), we present a summary of findings followed by more detailed discussion of the key factors leading to turnover. The quantitative data are interspersed with qualitative data gathered from actual statements by individual the respondents.

While the gender and ethnicity proportions of the respondents in this study approximate those of a randomized nationwide study (Light, 2003), this study was not designed to identify a representative sample of human service workers. While the responses may reflect general attitudes across the two sectors, no conclusions can be drawn from this study as to the numbers of workers who tend to leave their positions, either based on demographics, retirement status, income, job tenure, or any of the other factors considered. Rather, this report aims to expose the reasons behind job turnover and to provide information that can be used by policymakers and administrators to guide the human services field in a more positive direction. We hope that the feedback of those we surveyed serves to elucidate the complex situations and employment decisions faced by frontline workers.

Child Welfare

Who were the surveyed former child welfare workers?

Former caseworkers made up the bulk of the 161 respondents in the child welfare sample. These were frontline employees who provided direct services to children, teens, and families in crisis. They worked in a variety of settings, from emergency response to family reunification to adoption. The sample of child welfare workers was overwhelmingly female (83 percent) and relatively young. The majority of the caseworkers were under 40 years of age when they left their respective agencies: half were between the ages of 21 and 30 and 23 percent were between 31 and 40. Thirteen caseworkers had retired. Sixty percent were Caucasian, 19 percent African American, and 16 percent Latino.

The majority of CPS workers also brought college educations, prior relevant work experience, and expectations of a career in child welfare to their jobs. Nearly all (96 percent of caseworkers) had earned a bachelor's degree before taking the job. One-third (34 percent) of caseworkers had completed a master's degree. Before joining their respective agencies, the vast majority (89 percent) of caseworkers had prior experience in case management, counseling, or fieldwork. Twenty-two percent were bilingual and had used their language skills on the job.

How did the former child welfare workers feel about their jobs and why did they leave?

This sample of former child welfare workers generally liked their former jobs. However, 30 percent said they disliked their jobs somewhat or a great deal. Table 1 lists the percentage of former employees who endorsed various motivations for leaving their jobs. Not included in Table 1 are items related to other personal motivations, including retirement (5 percent), resignation in lieu of termination (6 percent), moving to another city (19 percent), and health reasons not related to job (32 percent).

The most common motivation for leaving (endorsed by two-thirds of caseworkers) was "feeling like work was never done" followed closely by "heavy caseloads." Importantly, more than one-third (35 percent) said that they would have stayed on the job if their caseload had been decreased. Some also indicated that they would have stayed on the job if the amount of paperwork had been reduced. They wanted to "reduce the length of reports" and "get voice activated system to bypass typing" and complained that "paperwork is ridiculous, children are the losers for it."

"Lack of quality agency leadership" was endorsed as a motivation for resigning by almost two-thirds of the caseworkers. Many frontline workers commented that if management practices had been better, they would have stayed on the job. They suggested management focus on the following things: "rethinking how services are delivered," "distributing work more fairly," "maintaining policy practices rather than continually changing it," and "consulting caseworkers before making major policy decisions."

Table 1: Child Welfare Motivations for Resigning and Job Approval

Motivations for Resigning	**CPS Caseworkers (N=156)**
Unending work	68%
Heavy caseload	66%
Lack of agency leadership	65%
Feeling like work made no difference	50%
Wanted to continue training or education	50%
Job related health reasons	48%
Unsatisfactory supervision	45%
Poor collaborations with other agencies	45%
Workplace safety	40%
Lack of opportunity for advancement	29%
Poor relationship with clients' parents	23%
Inadequate salary	19%
Lack of job security	13%
Better paying job opportunity available	8%
Inadequate benefits	7%
Non-job related health or personal reasons	32%
Moved to another City or State	19%
Reached retirement age	5%
Resignation in lieu of termination	6%
Job Approval	
"How much did you like your job?"	39% liked a great deal 31% somewhat liked 14% somewhat disliked 15% not liked at all

Not only did these former workers want changes in agency leadership, many wanted change at the immediate supervisory level as well. "Negative relationships with supervisors" were a factor in resigning for 45 percent of frontline staff. Many stressed their need for more support, more supervision, and better supervision. They pointed out a need for improving direct

supervision and included comments expressing a desire for "more educated supervisors and administrators," "more positive feedback," and "better trained management staff."

While workload and supervisory practices were clearly important, emotional issues were paramount for some. One-half of these former workers said that they were motivated to leave their jobs because of feelings of inefficacy and work-related health reasons. It is clear that many former frontline workers were quite distraught. They indicated that they felt they were not able to make enough of a difference in their clients' lives, and several had stress-related health problems.

When asked their parting thoughts at the close of the interview, a large portion of respondents shared feelings of demoralization and helplessness. Many said that there were not enough good programs for families. Even more workers stressed the problems of an overburdened system that pushes its strains onto the frontline workers. One person's remarks exemplified many others' when she said, "I didn't feel effective, I didn't have enough contact with clients….I was doing casework, not social work." Another said, "I wish I could have had more interaction with clients. All we were doing was putting band aids on situations." A third worker summed up the feelings expressed by many, "Children and families need tangible results and child welfare workers also need tangible results."

The foregoing section was a summary of why these employees left their jobs and, for many, their chosen career in child welfare. The next sections contain a more detailed look at the main issues and the areas of potential change.

What were they paid?

Nearly all of the child welfare workers were employed full time. Full-time caseworkers earned an annual average of $45,097, while part-time staff was paid an average full-time equivalent of $40,636.

Interestingly, very few child welfare workers stated that an increase in salary would have changed their decision to leave. In fact, only five percent said they would not have resigned had their salaries been increased. Only nine percent went on to better paying jobs. For these workers, salary did not seem to be the most prominent issue, although 19 percent said that inadequate salary was one of their motivations for resigning. In the words of one caseworker discussing overtime, "I always put in 10-20 hours more a week. I did it to get the job done, NOT for the money." Another caseworker put the salary issue in perspective, noting that caseworkers

in general are paid relatively little given their education, authority, and work hours: "We're overworked and underpaid, even though our salary is competitive with other child welfare agencies." Notwithstanding their dedication to their profession, it seems that having other family income may have been another factor in their feelings about salary. One-half of those interviewed said that they had a spouse or partner who provided another salary and the majority of those partners made more money than the caseworker.

Were there opportunities for professional development?

Almost everyone interviewed received on-the-job training. The average length of training was 179 hours (approximately one month full time equivalent). The vast majority (88 percent) reported that the training was helpful, and two-thirds felt more training was needed. The workers wanted more practical training. Recommendations for how training could be more beneficial included, "having new caseworkers buddy up with an experienced worker" and "ongoing training with caseloads to apply what is learned to cases."

Sixty percent of the child welfare employees were satisfied with opportunities for professional development, and over one-half found that furthering their career path was a gratifying part of their job. However, these findings show that a large minority of employees were not satisfied with the opportunities for professional growth.

What was the workload?

As previously stated, the majority of the caseworkers felt that they worked very hard and for too many hours. Sixty-one percent were dissatisfied with their overall workloads. Three out of four caseload-carrying workers (75 percent) said that their caseloads were too large. They commented, "I was told I would have a certain size caseload but in reality it was higher"; "I knew caseload would be high, I just didn't expect it to be *so* high"; and "There are too many families to do any good for them." As one caseworker put it, high caseloads were a "set up to failure."

The average daily caseloads for caseworkers ranged from 1 to 89 families, with an average of 31 families (see Figure 1). This translates to individual caseworkers being responsible on a daily basis for from two to 150 children, with an average of 43 children.

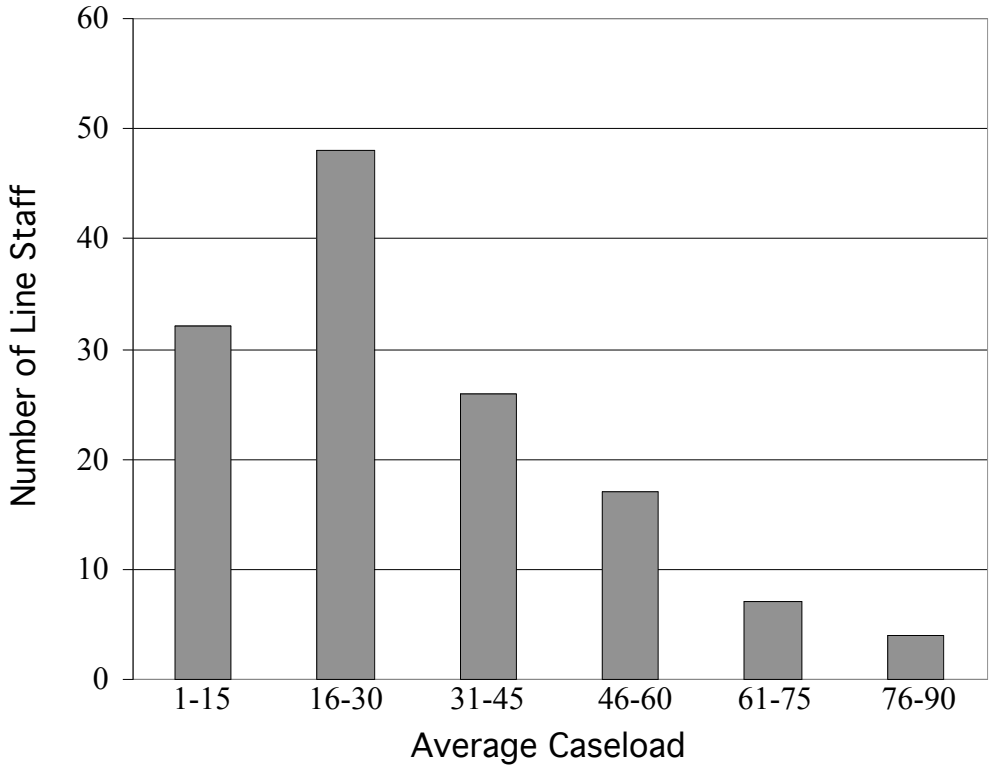

Figure 1. Average Caseload Per Day (n = 134)

Seventy-five percent of child welfare line staff reported working overtime "often." The majority received overtime pay or comp time. Some counties, however, would not pay for overtime, even though the workers said overtime was necessary. The necessity of working overtime to complete their jobs was a big source of stress for the respondents. The vast majority had negative comments about overtime, although the general sentiment was "it was part of the job, everyone put in overtime." Typical comments about overtime included, "The hours were unreasonable"; "It really upset me, and I was required to do it"; and "I hated it."

One of the main reasons the workers needed to work overtime was the amount of paperwork. Many of the caseworkers said they spent much of their time doing paperwork. Some saw the necessity of it ("If it isn't written, it didn't happen.") while many others made comments such as "There was too much paperwork," and "I'm not able to do the job I was hired for. Families suffered."

Another source of frustration for many about overtime was that they were pushed to use flex time or comp time instead of being paid for their overtime. Several workers commented that

they could not use the flex time because it just created more work that piled up and they could not get their jobs done. Although the cost of overtime is expensive for agencies, these former workers believed that comp time does not work when you have chronically overworked caseworkers.

Again, caseload and work hours were very important factors in employee resignation. Two-thirds (65 percent) of child welfare frontline staff said that their overall workload was an important factor in their decision to leave. More than one in three (35 percent) reported that they would have remained in their positions if their workloads had decreased. In general, they reported a sense of being "overwhelmed" by their caseloads and the long hours.

How long did they stay on the job?

While it seems that most child welfare employees planned to have a stable career at their agency, their tenure was not what they envisioned. At the time they were hired, two-thirds of caseworkers planned to stay with their agencies five years or more and nearly half (48 percent) planned to stay for at least ten years. However, the average length of employment was four years for caseworkers. Only nine percent of caseworkers remained with the agencies beyond ten years. A relatively large group, one in five, left within the first year.

After leaving their respective agencies, only 29 percent of caseworkers took subsequent jobs in the child welfare field. The vast majority left the field of child welfare, and indicated they were happy with their decisions. Over three-fourths of caseworkers reported feeling satisfied with their subsequent employment situations.

In reviewing job tenure, it is important to look at the relatively large group of employees (41 percent) who left within the first two years. This group is particularly important to describe because of the high cost of training and recruitment of new employees.[1] Workers who left within two years did not differ in their expectations of how long they had planned to stay on the job. There was also no differences in ethnicity, state or county level agency, caseload, competitiveness of salary, or whether they continued their education after leaving.

However, those who left within two years were significantly younger than those who stayed longer. Of those who left quickly, two-thirds (68 percent) were under 30 years old, compared to only 43 percent of those who stayed in their jobs over two years. Interestingly, significantly more employees who left their jobs within two years stayed in the child welfare

[1] These analyses did not include retirees.

field: 42 percent of those who left quickly stayed in child welfare vs. 23 percent of those who stayed longer. Thus, they were more likely to give up working at the particular agency but not in their field. Age may have been a factor in their continued optimism.

How did they feel after they left?

Given that their decisions to leave were often quite complex, their feelings after leaving were generally complex as well. While some respondents said that they "missed co-workers" and "would return to work if there wasn't mandatory overtime," many more expressed great relief. They said: "The demands, stress, and depression are gone—sometimes I still feel like I have PTSD"; "I took a big pay cut, but now I have more contact with clients"; "I enjoy working with families, but now I don't feel like I have their lives in my hands"; and "Everyday I'm away from CPS I feel a little bit lighter."

Juvenile Justice

Who were the surveyed former juvenile justice workers?

A total of 136 juvenile justice employees were interviewed. These respondents included former officers of county juvenile justice departments in two states and former employees of a private non-profit organization that provides field supervision and treatment services under contract with juvenile probation departments in several states.

Former juvenile justice county workers (n=75) included supervisors, probation officers, and detention and corrections staff. About half of all county workers were female; 60 percent were white, 20 percent Latino/a, and 15 percent African American. Almost all (96 percent) worked full time. Over 70 percent had attained a bachelor's degree, and 11 percent had completed a master's degree. Forty-one percent were over 50 upon leaving the agency, and almost half had retired.

The juvenile justice staff who worked for a non-profit agency (n=61) primarily provided field supervision to youth on probation. Their demographics were different from those of county workers. Specifically, the majority (71 percent) were under 40 when they left the agency, and none had retired. Non-profit workers were also more likely to be women (74 percent) and African American (57 percent), while about one-quarter were white. Approximately half worked full time; half had earned a bachelor's degree; and 23 percent had completed a master's degree.

Juvenile justice supervisors (n=14) worked for county probation departments and supervised frontline field and detention staff. All supervisors were responsible for budget management and staff scheduling, while some also carried a caseload and others directed specialized programs (such as sex-offender treatment services). The former supervisors were split evenly by gender, but the majority (64%) were white. Twenty-one percent were African American and 7% Latino. Nearly two-thirds had completed undergraduate study before hire; 7% had earned a master's degree. Most had been employed full-time, and 14% used their bilingual skills on the job. The vast majority (86%) were over 50 years of age when they left their respective agencies. Accordingly, 86% of the supervisors had left their jobs by retiring.

The former probation officers (n=54) were employed by various county agencies and provided direct field supervision and case management services to youth in the juvenile justice system. The demographics of probation officers were similar to supervisors, except they tended to be younger (54% were under 40 when they left their positions). The older employees were more likely to have retired; in fact, 40% of the probation officers we interviewed had retired from their positions. There were also more Latinos in the probation officer sample, nearly one-fourth. A large minority (41%) used their bilingual skills on the job. The majority brought college educations and prior relevant work experience to their jobs. Eighty-six percent had completed a bachelor's degree before being hired and 13% had earned a master's degree. More than three-fourths had prior experience in casework, counseling, field supervision or detention.

The detention and corrections officers (n=7) supervised pre- and post-adjudicated youth in secure facilities. The majority of juvenile detention and corrections officers (n=7) were male (86%) and white (57%). Most had bachelor's degrees (86%), and 71% brought prior experience in the field to their former positions. Forty-three percent possessed bilingual skills and had used them on the job. More than one-half (58%) were over 40 when they left their respective agencies and 3 of the 7 had retired from their agencies.

The final portion of juvenile justice workers were juvenile probation workers who worked for a non-profit agency (n=61). Most provided field supervision to young people on probation, while a few served as clinicians or case managers in residential treatment facilities. The respondents who had worked for the private non-profit agency were demographically different than the other juvenile justice workers. Specifically, none of these respondents had left their positions due to retirement. They were more likely to be women (74%) and African

American (57%). One quarter was white. They tended to be younger than other juvenile justice employees as well. As with child welfare workers, the majority (71%) were under 40 when they left the agency. Importantly, only one-half worked full-time. Approximately one-half had earned a bachelor's degree and an additional 23% had completed a master's degree.

How long did they stay on the job?

At the time they were hired, the majority (65 percent) of county probation officers and supervisors expected to stay on the job for 10 years or more, and in fact, the average time on the job for the county respondents was 14.5 years. However, this average is influenced by the long tenure of the retirees in the sample (average of 25 years). When retirees are taken out of the analysis, the average length of employment for the county sample was a little over four years. This was a considerably shorter length of employment than most had anticipated. Moreover, only about one in four (28 percent) of the former employees remained in the field of juvenile justice.

The former employees at the private agency had somewhat different expectations regarding length of employment. About one-half had anticipated staying with the agency for one to three years, and another quarter (26 percent) expected to stay ten years or more. In general, they left sooner than they had anticipated. The average length of employment for the respondents from the private agency was two years, with a majority leaving the agency within a year of their hire date. Only one in six (17 percent) went on to subsequent positions in the juvenile justice field.

Thus, the former employees from both types of juvenile justice agencies left their jobs earlier than they had anticipated. In looking at the dissimilarity between people who left within the first two years and those who stayed longer, there were only two significant differences. Those employees who left within two years were more likely to have worked at the private agency, and they were more likely to say that having a poor relationship with their supervisor was an important factor in their resignation. There were no other significant differences between the group that left within two years and the group that stayed longer (including demographics, day-to-day work activities, feelings of job satisfaction, salary issues, etc.).

How did former juvenile justice employees feel about their jobs?

The former juvenile justice employees tended to like their jobs overall; more than one-half of probation officers and workers said that they had liked their job "a great deal." Although

the majority (71 percent) like their former job, the opinions expressed were quite polarized. Many of the respondents said extremely positive things, such as, "I loved my career with probation," and "I loved the job a lot, I would change nothing about the position." Conversely, others conveyed much dissatisfaction about agency leadership, funds allocation, daily job stress, and the difficulty of helping juveniles within the system.

Why did they leave their jobs?

Juvenile justice employees left their jobs for a variety of reasons, most often citing several reasons for their departure. Approximately three-fourths of the respondents left their jobs for reasons other than retirement. All of the former employees who left through retirement were county employees. In order to focus on the issue of job turnover, the discussion that follows will focus on the population of non-retirees.

The impetus for resignations fell into two general categories that we have termed professional aspirations and day-to-day job issues. Table 2 lists the percentage of former employees who endorsed various motivations for leaving their jobs. The most cited reasons were in the category of professional aspirations. Not included in the table are certain personal reasons for leaving, including reaching age of retirement (2 percent), moving to another city (18 percent), and health reasons not related to job (21 percent). Also, 20 percent resigned in lieu of termination (7 percent of county workers and 26 percent of private agency workers).

Table 2: Motivations for Resigning

Professional Aspirations	Day to Day Job Issues
60% Lack of opportunity for advancement	43% Unsatisfactory supervision
55% Lack of agency leadership	43% Workplace safety
49% Inadequate salary	37% Unending work
40% Wanted to continue training or education	31% Heavy caseload
36% Better paying job opportunity available	28% Feeling like work made no difference
34% Lack of job security	27% Poor collaborations with other agencies
22% Inadequate benefits	15% Job-related health reasons
	13% Poor relationship with clients' parents

Professional Aspirations

Professional aspirations refer to expectations of career advancement and financial remuneration from employment. The most common reason for leaving was the perceived lack of opportunity for advancement. Interestingly, although approximately 60 percent of the frontline workers said this was an issue for them, only 14 percent of county workers would have stayed if promoted and only 3% of private agency workers would have stayed. This implies that they saw no real opportunities or they did not like the jobs into which they would have been promoted. For example, one frontline officer said, "I wanted to work way up the ladder, but once I took the job, I realized I didn't want to do so. Once I learned about the probation officer workload, I decided not to do it."

The perceived lack of opportunity is related to the next most endorsed motive, lack of quality agency leadership. The connection between the two can be gleaned from the comments of the workers. Many believed that opportunity was limited by agency leadership problems. Supervisors and frontline officers in the state and county agencies had many complaints about favoritism in promotional opportunities. Some examples of comments include "The inequity of promotions in the agency needs to be addressed to keep high quality staff from leaving… I saw them 'bend' the rules to get blessings from management," and "Supervisors are hired due to favoritism, not skill."

Lack of opportunity and complaints about agency management practices were also connected to feelings of having inadequate salary. Some felt that the "pay scale and promotions were political, and there were no opportunities for advancement." Approximately one-half of frontline staff felt that inadequate salary was a reason for leaving. One in three respondents said that if they had been paid better, they would have stayed on the job. Thus, salary was a very important issue for a large portion of the juvenile justice workers, and an increase in pay could have changed the turnover rate by one-third.

Day to Day Job Issues

The second tier of important factors affecting the decision to leave employment in juvenile justice had to do with problems faced daily on the job. Many struggled with negative relationships with supervisors (36 percent of frontline officers and 46 percent of non-profit

workers). While the majority of comments about supervision were positive, it is instructive to learn from the problems some people experienced. As one person remarked, "Supervisors are not approachable or supportive. Rules are arbitrarily enforced, and direct supervisors had no professionalism." A probation officer said, "If the supervisor liked you, you got a smaller caseload. My male supervisors were chauvinistic."

Workplace safety was especially relevant for the workers at the non-profit agency. About one-half of them cited safety concerns as a reason for their departure. As one worker put it, "I had to go into unfamiliar and unsafe neighborhoods – I worked alone."

Other day-to-day issues included struggling with heavy caseloads and feeling like work was never done. These issues were important for approximately one-third of the participants. Though most administrators and detention officers did not carry caseloads, the majority of county frontline officers and private non-profit workers did carry caseloads. For the caseload-carrying frontline officers, caseloads ranged from 4 to 110 youth and averaged 43 youth. For the non-retired private non-profit workers whose caseloads ranged from 4 to 55 youth and averaged 12 youth. About half of these private employees worked part time, which explains why their caseloads are much lower than those of county frontline staff. Nevertheless, it seems that caseload size was more important for county staff than for non-profit staff: while 48 percent of county workers stated that "heavy caseloads" were important to their decisions to leave, only 27 percent of non-profit employees reported the same.

Importantly, most former employees cited potential changes the agencies could have made to help them stay on the job longer. In fact, only a small minority (18 percent) said that nothing could have made them stay on the job.

The foregoing section was a summary of why these employees left their jobs in juvenile justice. The sections below contain a more detailed look at the main issues and the factors most important to job retention.

How did they feel about opportunities for advancement?

Much importance was placed on career aspirations by these former juvenile justice workers. Frontline staff put utmost importance on the opportunity for advancement: 37 percent of respondents indicated that lack of opportunity was a "very important" determinant in their decision to leave. Many felt that they wanted to progress in their career, but either were not able to at their agency or did not want the types of advancement opportunities offered there. While

lack of advancement opportunity was the most cited motivation for leaving, only eight percent of frontline staff would have stayed if promoted. Only two percent overall would have stayed if they had had opportunities to write grants or do development type work. Similarly, only two percent would have stayed if more training had been offered. Thus, it was not that these individuals were not motivated to advance, it was that they perceived advancement opportunities as unavailable, unattainable, insufficient, or arbitrary. As one probation officer stated, "If I had to do over again, I would not have gone into juvenile probation. The most gifted workers are often discouraged from seeking promotion or choose to not work with administration due to lots of favoritism." In fact, many juvenile justice workers went on to continue their education (approximately 40 percent of the frontline workers).

How did salary impact their decision to leave?

Salary was both an important motivating factor for leaving and would have been an incentive for staying. One in three (33 percent) former county officers said they would have stayed if they had been paid more, compared to 18 percent of the former private agency employees. As one county employee commented, "The salary is too low for the amount of work and the graveyard shift." This premium on salary issues by county employees was true even though the non-profit agency workers were paid dramatically less. The supervisors made an annual average full-time salary of $63,000, and the county probation, detention, and corrections officers made an average of $45,000. The probation workers at the private agency made considerably less money, an average full-time annual salary of $25,000 (about $12/hr).

When asked if their salary was competitive with similar positions in the agency, the workers at the private non-profit agency were significantly more likely to say no. Forty-four percent of the workers at the private agency did not feel their salary was competitive compared to only 11 percent of county employees. Surprisingly, given the relatively low pay of the private agency, very few former workers complained. In fact, the comments about the private organization were generally positive and summed up with "___ was a good agency with a lot of dedicated people. The trackers were very dedicated, and if I could speak for them, I would say they needed more pay." Another said, "Salary really does mean a lot; you can't live on minimum wage." Interestingly, a greater percentage of county employees left their position for a better paying job (44 percent vs. 30 percent from the private agency).

How did they feel about agency management and supervisory practices?

Problems with the way the agency was managed were cited as a very important reason for leaving by four out of every ten employees who resigned. Complaints about the agency leaders focused on lack of responsiveness to employee needs and disorganization or un-professionalism. The county employees were more likely to discuss responsiveness issues and included comments such as: "Management didn't work in the community, but wanted to run the program"; "I think that it would make a huge difference if managers could make it a point to thank staff and make them feel appreciated"; and "I was working with a lot of unhappy and bitter people because of how management treats them, and this creates a very tense situation."

The comments about leadership issues at the private agency focused on negative professional practices. Representative examples include the following: "Management is disorganized, there are lots of scheduling conflicts, and I felt a lot of stress and frustration"; "Supervisors would fail to show up at meetings and appointments"; and finally "Great ideas are ignored – only directors are considered important."

A negative relationship with a supervisor was a less important motive for resignation than problems with the agency leadership, yet it was still important to almost one-half (46 percent) of the former private agency employees and 36 percent of the former county agency employees. In fact, issues with supervisors were significantly more likely to affect employees who stayed less than two years.

Did they feel safe on the job?

It is difficult to focus on other employment issues when you fear for your safety. A lack of workplace safety was a much greater issue for the probation workers at the non-profit agency than county probation officers. In fact, more than one-half of the former employees of the private agency said that feeling unsafe was a motivation for their resignation. Many of these workers had jobs tracking individuals in the community and being in neighborhoods they felt were unsafe. One worker said, "I worked in bad neighborhoods [that were] scary." They "had no back up" and were "riding alone." More than one in ten (12 percent) said they would have stayed if they had felt safer on the job.

What did they do after they left?

Only one in five of the employees who resigned stayed in the juvenile justice field (28 percent of county officers and 16 percent of the private juvenile justice workers). Approximately 70 percent of them, including the ones who stayed in the juvenile justice field, felt satisfied with

their new positions. One in six (17 percent) were unemployed at the time of the interview. When asked how they felt about their current jobs, the former county employees focused on opportunities for professional advancement: "I now feel I am compensated appropriately – I get paid according to how much I do, and there are opportunities for advancement," and "I love it: I have great administration, who are very supportive. They explain why things are being done and encourage professional development."

Several of the former workers from the non-profit agency stated that they would want to go back to their former work if agency management issues were improved. Comments included, "I liked the job – helping kids and instilling hope. I had a variety of clients, and successes were fantastic. I didn't like the organization." Another said, "I would return to [the agency] if changes were made. Raises were slow to come and supervisors didn't do regular evaluations. There was local and regional mismanagement."

Most former juvenile justice employees were happy with their career change. As one worker said, the new job "allows me to function. It is well organized and gives me the tools I need to perform well." Another former worker said she was "able to contribute to the environment in which I work with children and families and still get to use case management skills. It's not as stressful: I don't ever 'have' to see someone. I have the ability to close the door if I need a break." Finally, there were those employees who were happy to have left the human service field altogether: "Managing a restaurant means more money, and I can fire a bad employee, but I can't change a bad court decision."

Retirees

The respondent included 37 former county juvenile justice employees who retired from their jobs. As expected, they differed in several ways from those who resigned before reaching retirement age: retirees had longer tenure, were older, and had higher salaries, more positive views of agency leadership, and smaller caseloads. Even though the retirees had more positive perceptions of their former jobs, they had similar perspectives on several important issues and did not differ from resignees in suggestions of how to improve agency functioning. Like those who had resigned, retirees (average tenure of 25 years) felt that there was too much overtime, too little financial remuneration, and not enough opportunity for professional advancement.

Comparison of Former Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Employees

While the respondents in this study were former human service employees with many similarities, some of the issues they faced on the job were quite different across the child welfare and juvenile justice sectors. In this section, we will compare respondents who worked for similar agencies in similar positions ; in other words, we will compare employees who worked for a government agency, were considered frontline staff, carried a caseload, and had resigned from their job (not retired).

First we will discuss the similarities and move on to focus on the differences. When the respondents accepted their former jobs, they were similar in how long they planned to stay on the job. They were also similar in their ages at the time they left and the length of time they stayed on the job. They also fell into similar racial/ethnic groupings. It is important to note that there are some demographic differences between the former juvenile justice and child welfare workers. The child welfare workers were more likely to be female and to have more education. More than one-third (37 percent) of the juvenile justice sample consisted of men, compared to 16 percent of the child welfare sample. The child welfare workers were twice as likely to have a master's degree (34 percent vs. 17 percent).

The similarities among human service workers in juvenile justice and child welfare are just as important to discuss as the differences. These samples were similar in several important ways. The first, and probably most striking, was that they all tended to have liked their former jobs (about 70 percent in each sector). Also, one of most important motivations for leaving, lack of quality agency leadership, was important for approximately 65 percent of both types of workers. Additionally, problems with supervisors were a motivation for resigning for approximately 45 percent of the former employees across agencies. In both sectors, the former employees did not assign much importance to the following motives for leaving: continuing education, negative relationships with clients, moving, lack of job security, and fringe benefits.

On the other hand, depending on the sector (juvenile justice or child welfare), the remaining motivations for leaving were quite important to the majority of the former employees. The differences among workers in the two sectors fall into two general categories. The juvenile justice workers were more likely motivated to leave because of personal career aspirations or

other personal reasons. The child welfare employees were more likely motivated to resign because of serious day-to-day job stresses.

Although salaries and on-the-job training opportunities were similar across sectors, the probation, detention, and youth corrections officers were more than twice as likely to cite factors such as "lack of opportunity for advancement," "inadequate salary," and "opportunity for a better paying job" as reasons for leaving. Frontline employees from the county juvenile justice sector were about four times more likely than the child welfare workers to indicate that an increase in salary would have influenced their decision to stay. Further analysis showed salary and career aspiration concerns were more likely to be important for male juvenile justice employees (64 percent), followed by female juvenile justice employees (37 percent), male child welfare workers (27 percent), and finally female child welfare workers (19 percent).

Child welfare employees were more likely to cite day-to-day job stresses as their main motivators for resigning. Child welfare workers were significantly more likely to indicate the following job stressors as their main motivations for leaving: heavy caseloads, feeling of unending work, feeling they could not make a difference, having job-related health problems, poor collaboration with other agencies, and feeling a lack of safety on the job. Related to these complaints, child welfare workers were more likely to work overtime and said they would have been more likely to stay on the job if their workload had decreased.

Discussion

On a day-to-day basis, direct service providers in juvenile justice and child welfare face the unusual stresses of serving some of society's most needy and helpless members, bridging the divide between the needs of their clients and the needs of the community and society as a whole, and all along navigating the cumbersome legal and social welfare systems. Yet it seems they do not leave their positions because of the inherent stress of the type of work they do. While stress certainly plays a role, it seems there are organizational explanations—and possible solutions—for much of what drives them away: lack of opportunities for advancement, burdensome workloads, and lack of agency leadership and supervisory support.

Provide Opportunities for Advancement and Recognition

Lack of recognition and limited opportunities for advancement were clearly important factors in turnover in both sectors. In general, these workers prepared for their profession through years of higher education, yet once they entered the field, many felt that they were not able to advance in their careers. For many of the juvenile justice workers, the recognition they sought was in the form of salary increases and promotional incentives. According to the former employees, one out of three of them would have stayed if their salaries had increased adequately. The Partnerships for Children and Families Project recommends providing social workers with contingent rewards like recognition throughout their employment period, especially when monetary rewards are not feasible (Harvey & Stalker 2003). Child welfare workers were also interested in recognition and advancement, yet salary did not seem to play a large role. Many wanted more direct on-the-job training to improve their skills, greater recognition of their hard work by their agencies, and support in combining career and personal lives. These findings are supported by Bernatovicz (1997), who studied the child and family services system in Maine and identified several factors that could positively impact employee retention: provide recognition and rewards for workers completing three years of service, support the use of flexible schedules, and authorize non-emergency overtime pay.

Reduce Onerous Workloads

Even though over two-thirds of the former employees said they had liked their jobs, both sectors reported heavy workloads as a major issue. This complaint was especially common among child welfare workers. The standards for child welfare practice developed by the Child Welfare League of America state that workers should have no more than 12 cases on their daily caseload, whether for investigations or foster care placements. On average, the former workers interviewed for this study reported caseloads two to three times higher than recommended.

High caseloads were the most prominent factor in resignation for the former child welfare employees. Unmanageable caseloads have a number of negative consequences for both workers and clients. High caseloads make it almost impossible for each client to receive thoughtful and consistent services. High caseloads are related to stress and burnout and can leave workers feeling negative about the quality of services they can deliver. Furthermore, overwhelming caseloads and overtime take a toll on the daily lives of the employees' own families. Dickinson and Perry (2002) also reported that those who left their child welfare positions felt stressed or

burned out.

The literature reveals that more administrative duties are being expected of human service workers, and this study's findings are consistent with these claims (Lait & Wallace, 2002). Workers are being removed from direct contact with clients, partly by burdens of paperwork. This means that service workers have fewer opportunities for gratifying experiences with clients. For most of these workers, direct contact was the catalyst for choosing this work in the first place. Almost all participants said that it was important to them to follow up with clients, yet less than half reported being able to do this.

A few studies have made recommendations for reducing caseloads and staffing shortages. Bernatovicz (1997) makes several suggestions: contract with outside providers to reduce time case workers spend on locating services; move children through the system expeditiously; assign one staff member to explore ways to increase the number of available foster homes; place master of social work (MSW) students in offices to provide additional support. A U.S. General Accounting Office study (2003) recommended that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) use funds to research promising approaches or provide guidance and technical assistance in order to reduce staffing shortages and caseloads.

Implement Open and Supportive Agency Management Practices

Beyond caseloads, many former employees reported that better supervision and management would have been influential in retaining them as employees. They suggested several changes, but mainly they wanted more practical support and more involvement in policy decisions that affected them.

The majority of child welfare and juvenile justice frontline workers cited poor agency leadership as a main factor in their leaving. Issues with immediate supervisors were a factor in leaving as well. Almost one-third of frontline employees in each sector did not consider their supervisors competent. These workers desired feedback and support from their supervisors and the agency overall, but they too often did not feel they received it. Almost all the respondents thought feedback from their supervisors was important, but only half felt they received the feedback they needed.

This study's findings suggest that unsupportive agency management practices were a leading cause of burnout. Many in the field believe that burnout is a function of working with

difficult clients; however, this study contradicts that widely held notion. A prior study by Whitehead (1989) also found that client contact is not the cause of burnout in probation and correctional officers, a conclusion that sharply contrasted with most previous theoretical work in the field. Whitehead concluded that organizational issues, such as role conflict, are the most critical sources of burnout. Therefore, managerial policy should center upon organizational improvements to reduce job stress and job dissatisfaction.

Several previous studies and literature reviews have emphasized the importance of good supervision in retaining frontline human service workers (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003; Cicero-Reese & Clark, 1998; Dickinson & Perry, 1998; Rycraft, 1994; Samantrai, 1992; Winefield & Barlow, 1995). Those workers who stayed in their jobs described supervisors in the following ways:

- Is helpful, supportive, and accessible
- Listens to work-related problems
- Helps staff complete difficult or large tasks
- Concerned with staff's welfare
- Shows approval when staff does a good job

The results of this study also indicate that agencies should foster an environment of employee participation. Employees whose opinions are sought by supervisors and administrators may feel more valued by the agency in which they are employed, and thus, be less likely to leave. In Dennis' (1998) study, job satisfaction was most strongly related to feelings of empowerment. The results of the current study support this previous research in showing that feelings of empowerment can be generated by positive agency leadership and good supervisory practices.

Human services work is challenging. Workers entering the field know they will have to give a great deal of themselves to be successful in their jobs. These results indicate that they also expect a great deal of their employers. Workloads at these agencies may always be high, just as salaries may always be relatively low. Although they understand this, frontline service providers have their limits. They feel that, regardless of tight budgets, leadership can play a role in easing the burden. Like salaries, workloads are important to these workers, but their expectations include other factors as well. Given the stressful nature of these jobs, it is imperative the workers

find their work environments encouraging, healthy, and helpful. This type of environment can be created for frontline staff in child welfare and juvenile justice by creating fair and adequate opportunities for advancement and recognition, making caseloads smaller and paperwork demands more manageable, and training supervisors to be supportive and responsive.

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